

## Foundations for Teaching Writing Online

Teaching writing online is still teaching writing; a number of the foundational principles still apply: students need clear expectations, good models, continuous feedback, opportunities to revise, and regular interactions with faculty and peers. That said, doing these things online will be different from doing them face-to-face (f2f), so writing instructors need to adapt their best practices when shifting into an online learning environment.

### Some guiding principles of online instruction

**Build community:** Learning and writing are both social activities, and research shows that creating personal connections in an online course increases student retention. When instruction shifts online, we lose some of our ability to casually interact with students, and we need to intentionally build some of this into the course design to avoid feelings of isolation. Build community by making connections with and between your students; let them know that you and they are real people. Continue with these interactions throughout the semester.

**Build trust:** Part of building community is building trust. Students need to know that they can rely on their instructors as much as instructors need to know they can rely on their students. Trust can often break down when expectations between instructors and students differ. This means that we need to be clear and consistent about our expectations; we should also be reliable and help set routines for students. Instructors should tell students what they expect of students and let their students know what to expect of them.

**Ensure access:** Online instruction is popular in part because it allows for a different kind of access to education, but it comes with its own challenges. In particular, students won't learn if they can't access the learning environment, the materials, or other technologies that are part of the course. They might also struggle with adjusting to new approaches to learning, particularly around time and task management. So, plan how students will access your course, build in multiple pathways to information (including due dates), and make sure the environment is easy to navigate.

### Some guiding principles of online writing instruction

**Teach writing, not technology:** Because online instruction is facilitated by technologies that are often new to faculty and students, instructors can sometimes feel overwhelmed by all of the possibilities and technical issues that arise. But online writing instruction should focus first and foremost on teaching students to write. So, take it slow; don't feel compelled to add all the new technologies. Use what you are familiar with and believe will support the objectives of your course and the foundations of your teaching. Simple asynchronous tools like journals, wikis, and discussion boards are often quite effective.

**Adapt what you do well to the new environment:** Teaching online does require different approaches to teaching than f2f instruction, but that doesn't mean instructors need to completely relearn how to teach. Rather, instructors should adapt what they do best in the classroom to the online environment. To do so, build from your values and strengths as an

instructor. If peer pedagogies are really important to you, develop the course around that approach; if you really enjoy individual interactions with students, feature conferencing and other forms of personal feedback.

**Watch the workload; online instruction is literacy intensive (for you and your students):**

Online instruction, particularly asynchronous instruction, is literacy and work intensive as many classroom interactions now happen through written communications. That means that both instructors and students will be reading and writing a lot more than they do in f2f environments. This work takes more time but can also help students process and reflect on their learning. Keep this in mind as you design assignments and instruction; consider using some writing-to-learn activities that deepen engagement and encourage reflection but reduce the stakes.

### Some strategies for teaching writing online

**Plan backwards:** Often, we think that we need to teach a type of writing and then consider the kinds of support needed to teach it. Instead, consider what you want your students to learn and then decide what type of writing project(s) facilitate(s) that learning. Often, one or a series of writing-to-learn activities are more appropriate (and engaging!) than a big research article.

**Create a schedule:** To manage your workload, decide when you will work on various parts of the course. For example, you might compose and distribute weekly announcements on Mondays, engage in discussion boards on Tuesdays and Thursday, and offer feedback on journals on Fridays. Sharing and maintaining this kind of routine can also help build trust because student know what and when to expect materials, feedback, and interactions with you.

**Clarify and model expectations:** Students takes their cues from faculty, so we need to be mindful of our own participation when teaching online, both in terms of when and how we participate. For example, if you expect student to write formally in a journal, write formal instructions and responses to their posts (either individually or as a whole group). If you want students to engage frequently in a discussion board, clarify when and how frequently they should respond; then, follow those guidelines yourself. So, clarify what you expect of students in various spaces (i.e., a discussion board or a reflective journal) and model those expectations.

**Make learning personal:** To help build community, share a little bit about yourself with your students. Make a personal profile and upload a picture of yourself or something you value. Create an ice-breaker in the first week and participate in it. Have an open Q&A or water cooler discussion board for informal chatter about the course. Provide feedback or create messages through video or audio formats so that students can hear your voice. Talk about your writing projects and processes; let them know writing can be hard for you too!

### Further reading

Hewett, B. L. & DePew, K. E. (Eds.). (2015). *Foundational practices of online writing instruction*.  
<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/owi/>

Borgman, J. & McArdle, C. (2019). *Personal, accessible, responsive, strategic: resources and strategies for online writing instructors*. <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/practice/pars/>